

September 9, 2018
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 7:31-37

Again he left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis. And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him off by himself away from the crowd. He put his finger into the man's ears and, spitting, touched his tongue; then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him, "Ephphatha!" (that is, "Be opened!") And (immediately) the man's ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly. He ordered them not to tell anyone. But the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it. They were exceedingly astonished and they said, "He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and (the) mute speak."

Background:

Last week the gospel text began with the Pharisees from Jerusalem questioning Jesus about why his disciples disregarded the ritual washing of hands before eating. At the end of that text, Jesus tells his disciples that impurity comes from within a person, not from the outside. Mark's gospel then continues by describing Jesus' interaction with a Greek woman who begged him to free her daughter from an unclean spirit. Jesus resists the woman's request because of her ancestry, but her faith and persistence persuade Jesus to respond, and ultimately he heals her daughter. (Mark 8: 24-30) Jesus' interaction with the Syrophenician woman and the cure of her daughter precede Jesus' interaction with the deaf man in the gospel text for this week.

In the first verse of this week's text, Mark describes Jesus' travel route from Tyre to the Decapolis. The route is unusual. It indicates that Jesus traveled out of his way north to Sidon, then turned back south and ended up even further south than when he had begun. This route places Jesus clearly in the midst of Gentile communities. By taking the time to describe Jesus' travel route, Mark wants his readers to be aware that Jesus went out of his way to take this route. Jesus is not letting the ritual impurity associated with contact with Gentiles deter him from traveling where he feels he needs to go.

Mark's description of the healing is distinct in that it is a typical story of healers of the day. The other gospel writers prefer to portray Jesus as healing by word alone, representing a more direct connection to the power of God. The miracle workers of the day would touch the sick person, sometimes using a potion or saliva in the healing, and they would use some sort of sounds or incantations in foreign tongues. The use of saliva was understood in Jesus' culture to contain some of the personal power of the healer. Spitting was associated with confronting evil. His "looking up to heaven and groaning" could easily be understood as a prayer. Here Mark is portraying Jesus in a way that the Gentile community would be familiar with.

This account is also unique in that Jesus is healing someone who is deaf. Hearing, in a primarily oral culture, is extremely important. Those who cannot hear are at great disadvantage and are often ostracized. Being open to God was expressed as "listening to God." Jesus' own ministry was largely one of teaching about the Reign of God. When Jesus encounters this man, he takes him away from the crowd so they are by themselves. He does not lay his hands on him but rather puts his fingers into his ears and, with his own saliva, touches his tongue. He commands the ears to "be open" and immediately they are. Mark's description includes more intimate details that are missing in other descriptions.

It is also worth noting that next week the gospel text will be Mark 8:27-35. In this familiar text Jesus will ask the disciples who the people are saying he is. Then he asks them who they say he is. Peter will declare "You are the Messiah." (Mark 8:29) In some way, what Jesus is doing for the deaf man, opening his ears so that he can speak, he is also doing for his disciples, opening their minds. In next week's gospel, Peter will speak for the first time the truth that Jesus is the Messiah.

Reflection Questions:

1. When you think of taking the “scenic route” in order to encounter unfamiliar people...
2. Consider how different your life would be without ever being able to hear...
3. Have you ever been deaf to the voice of God?
4. When you think of Jesus going out of his way to be among the gentiles and to encounter this deaf man...
5. What part of this story holds the most fascination for you? What is that suggesting to you?
6. Can you take some time now to talk to God about your desire to hear the voice of God in your own life, your desire to have God speak to someone who seems to be deaf to God’s presence, or your desire to be a sign of God presence to others?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for September 9, 2018, the Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thus says the Lord: Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not!

Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared;

then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing.

Streams will burst forth in the desert, and rivers in the steppe.

The burning sands will become pools, and the thirsty ground, springs of water.

Praise the Lord, my soul! The God of Jacob keeps faith forever,
secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets captives free, and gives sight to the blind;

the Lord raises up those who were bowed down.

The Lord loves the just; the Lord protects strangers.

The fatherless and the widow the Lord sustains, but the way of the wicked he thwarts.

The Lord shall reign forever; your God, O Zion, through all generations. Alleluia.

My brothers and sisters, show no partiality as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

For if a man with gold rings and fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor person in shabby

clothes also comes in, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes

and say, “Sit here, please,” while you say to the poor one, “Stand there,” or “Sit at my feet,”

have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil designs?

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Did not God choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him?

Jesus went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis. People brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him off by himself away from the crowd. He put his finger into the man's ears and, spitting, touched his tongue; then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him, "Ephphatha!"— that is, "Be opened!" — Immediately the man's ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly. He ordered them not to tell anyone. But the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it. They were astonished and they said, "He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Excerpts from Isaiah 35:4-7; Psalm 146:6-10; James 2:1-5; and Mark 7:31-37